

No Choice For Travis?: A Deconstructive Viewing of *Taxi Driver*

Released in 1976, *Taxi Driver* redefined the modern American anti-hero. Following in the footsteps of characters such as Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, Martin Scorsese's Travis Bickle is portrayed as a broken idealist who quickly falls prey to cynicism, only to ultimately commit decidedly unheroic acts that are still viewed as heroic. A common theme among anti-heroes and the texts they inhabit is their adherence to a philosophy of metaphysical determinism; after all, it is certainly common to hear the phrase "I did what I had to do" or something similar come from the mouth of such a character. To them, there is only one outcome, because they are forced to live the path that has been laid out for them. Indeed, this is often a cause for the character's cynicism. *Taxi Driver* is no different, as the conflict between predestination and self-direction is blatant throughout the entire film, ultimately ending with the main character's adherence to a path that he believes has been laid out for him. However, this determinist agenda is an unstable ideological construct. This construct, which rests upon the binary opposition of determinism/libertarianism, is deconstructed by the inherent ambivalence the film holds toward said opposition. Instead, there is a conflict that lies in the text's hidden interest in the very same libertarian outlook that it seeks to condemn, and this can be seen through the film's use of techniques such as *mis en scène*. This conflict leads to a self-contradiction that reveals the limitations of the ideology the film attempts to put forth.

In William James's essay "The Dilemma of Determinism," he offers the following definition of the term:

It [hard determinism] professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities bidden in its womb; the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning (James 3).

In lay terms, hard determinism is the belief that every event is caused by a causal chain of events that began in the beginning of time. There is only one possibility for the outcome of any given event, and that outcome has been determined by events that came before it. There is no chance of this ever changing; the future has been determined since the

Earth came into existence, and this trend will only cease when the Earth reaches its end.

On the other end of the spectrum is metaphysical libertarianism, which is the belief that humans have free will, and this free will is incompatible with the notion of determinism (Dupré 170). The libertarian holds that one has the freedom to make decisions for themselves. The choices they make are not determined by past events that have been culminating for centuries.

In Richard Armstrong's *Understanding Realism*, he states that cinema is an “ideological institution practised by individuals and groups with a vested interest in the attitudes, values and type of society that their films promote” (Armstrong 51). He defines “ideology” as a “system of ideas which justifies and underpins a particular...system” (Armstrong 52). A close viewing of *Taxi Driver* could reveal the ideology that determinism exists in the world, and that libertarianism is false and incompatible with this belief. This idea that the film's message consists of polar opposites with one side being favored is directly in line with the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida.

Structuralism holds that the human mind perceives oppositions between ideas in terms of binary oppositions: “two ideas, directly opposed, each of which we understand by means of its opposition to the other” (Tyson 202). For example, the structuralist holds that humans understand the concept of “evil” because it is the opposite of “good”; these two ideas. The same could be said for determinism and libertarianism; one term has a meaning because it has an opposite. However, Derrida noted that there are hierarchies of sorts between each pair. One is always privileged by its text, and identifying the privileged term allows the reader to understand the ideology being perpetuated by said text. In deconstruction, one must examine the ways in which the text seems to “misspeak,” thereby showing either that how the two members of the binary opposition overlap, or showing that the text really privileges what was initially thought to be the junior member in the opposition. By doing so, the text deconstructs itself (Tyson 247).

As stated above, the film *Taxi Driver* seems to promote the belief of determinism. Travis Bickle begins the film as a libertarian. He seems to believe that the choices he makes are his own, and that there was always the chance he could have made a different one. For example, consider the scene in which Travis first applies for the job as a taxi driver. When asked why he “wants to hack,” he replies “I can't sleep nights.” When the dispatcher replies that there are “porno theaters for that,” Travis answers with “I know, I tried that.” Through this exchange, we can see that Travis has taken an active role in trying to better his life, though his methods may seem unorthodox. We know he is a veteran of some war, because he was honorably discharged from the Marines. He says cannot sleep (it is implied that the reason for this stems from his time at war, as the dispatcher, who was also a Marine, gives Travis a knowing look when he learns this information, and the camera focuses on him to further show this), so he is attempting to get a job or find other ways to occupy his time.

Travis further proves his libertarian beliefs when he pursues Betsy. He claims that he

is lonely, so, instead of accepting his loneliness as fate, he latches onto her and attempts to win her over. To do so, he dresses nicely and buys her gifts and dinner. We also see that he is apparently good at reading people, because he seems to dissect Betsy's character after simply watching her from his car. She is intrigued by him, and goes out with him: first for coffee, then to a movie. However, when Travis takes her to a pornographic film, she is understandably upset, and leaves in a huff. He calls her from a payphone to ask for another date, and the camera moves away and focuses on the hallway during the conversation. It is almost as if the viewer is standing next to him and looking away, symbolizing how awkward and difficult the conversation is, similar to a scene in *Tuesday, After Christmas*. After confronting her at her office and being forced to leave, he comments that Betsy is “just like all the others, cold and distant.” It is at this point that Travis's outlook on life seems to change, a product of his failed relationship and the hardships of his job.

Travis's transition from libertarian to determinist falls in line with Søren Kierkegaard's idea of the absurd. In existential philosophy, the term “absurd” refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent meaning in life and the inability to find any (Kierkegaard 44). When faced with this feeling of absurdity, says Kierkegaard, one often feels a feeling of despair, and he describes three distinct “levels” of it. Despair begins with a misconception of one's self, moves to a desire to not be oneself, and then finally moves into what he calls “demonic despair” (Kierkegaard 10). This final level of despair, the one that seems to plague Travis, occurs when the individual knows he is despairing, seeks help, but cannot find it. It is at this point that he realizes the absurdity at work in the universe. At this level, Kierkegaard says, the individual becomes so desensitized that they no longer seek help, and, indeed, “even if God in Heaven and all the angels offered him help, he would not want it” (Kierkegaard 42).

It becomes evident that Travis has reached this level of despair because his view moves drastically from libertarianism to determinism in under five minutes. Because his plans did not turn out the way he wanted them to, he begins to believe that his life is predetermined. While writing in his journal, he calls himself “God's lonely man,” implying that God has a course set for his life to take. After that, prior to his planned attack on Senator Palantine, he states “my whole life has pointed in one direction. There has never been a choice for me.” The film seems to be promoting the determinism aspect of the binary here, because the main character has tried libertarianism and it failed him.

Travis is not the only character in *Taxi Driver* who seems to push the film's determinist ideas. During Travis's transition away from libertarianism, he meets with fellow cabbies Wizard, Dough-Boy, and Charlie T. As Wizard gets up to leave, Travis asks to speak with him about his problems, and he begins by stating that he is getting some “bad ideas in my head,” and that he needs to “just go out and do something.” Wizard dismisses this, responding knowingly with “the taxi life. I know.” Instead of giving Travis any real advice, he simply begins to spit determinist philosophy at him:

Look at it this way: a man takes a job, you know, and that job becomes what he is. You do a thing, that's what you are. I've been a cabbie for seventeen years – ten years at night – but I still don't own my own cab. And do you know why? Because I don't want to; that must be what I want, you know, to be on the night shift with this cab. You understand? You become – you get a job, you become the job. One guy lives in Brooklyn, one guys lives in Sutton Place, you get a lawyer, another guy's a doctor, one guy dies, another guy gets well, people are born...You got no choice, anyway, I mean. We're all fucked, more or less.

Wizard's philosophy, while there is a hint of libertarianism within it, is still overtly deterministic: the world dictates that a person takes a place in life, and they will do this no matter what. He does, after all, tell Travis that he will always be a cabbie; he is “fucked, more or less.” Travis's response to this is “that's just about the dumbest thing I've ever heard,” yet we still hear him echo these words later in the film when he admits that there is “no choice for me.” The *mis en scène* here is important to the message: the camera switches between Travis and Wizard through shot/reverse shot to show the conflicting natures between the two characters (a technique also seen in *One Fine Day* to achieve a similar effect). After this, however, the camera pans back for a long cut where Wizard spouts his message, and Travis leans in close, listening intently, suggesting that, even though he claims to disagree, he is nevertheless intrigued. Wizard's soliloquy here, then, seems to be the statement the film is making, as there is a lot of importance drawn to it, and it seems to be the moment that finishes Travis's transformation into a determinist, as he never again overtly utters libertarian ideology from this point forward.

However, there are some inherent contradictions and misspeaks in Wizard's speech that seem to undermine what he means to say. First, consider his opening statement: a man takes a job, and the job becomes what he is. By using the word “man” here instead of “person,” he seems to be insisting that this deterministic viewpoint only applies to men. There is nothing wrong with this on the surface; we see him in an earlier scene talking about women as if they are merely sexual objects, so he is obviously not the most sensitive man when it comes to feminism. The complication instead lies in the fact that his speech is so important. His soliloquy, as mentioned above, seems to be the film's message. Why, then, is the child prostitute Iris, a woman, also subjected to determinism? Despite her constant insistence on the contrary, she is unable to move beyond her station. Her pimp, Matthew, abuses her and keeps her down, and Travis forces “freedom” on her at the end of the film by killing her captors; she never gets any input in the matter. According to Wizard's opening sentence, what he is about to say applies only to men. This, of course, directly contradicts what we see happening to Iris, and, therefore, this begins to undermine what he is saying.

A further complication can be found in the same opening sentence. Wizard says that a man takes a job, and the “job becomes what he is.” It is not uncommon to hear the phrase “a man becomes his job,” implying that the influence a person feels in the workplace can

seep into his personality. But what Wizard seems to be saying is that a job becomes an aspect of the man taking it on. This is directly contradictory to the film's determinist agenda; if the job becomes "what the man is," then this implies that the man in question has power to change things. If the man can hold sufficient influence over his career to make it a part of him, then he is directly defying the supposed train of events that determinism would hold him to. What Wizard says, then, begins to deconstruct, and shows that the determinist view of the film starts to overlap with libertarianism.

Even when Travis seems to move into a mindset of determinism, there are contradictions that seem to suggest that he has never changed; or, perhaps even more problematically, that the film's message carries further tensions. For example, when Travis is in his apartment preparing to shoot Palantine, he gives a soliloquy about about how his life has followed a set path to this point. "Now I see it clearly," he says. "My whole life has pointed in one direction. I see that now. There never has been any choice for me." This is supposed to show Travis's final transformation into a determinist. However, there is an obvious problem with his line of thinking: Travis never shoots Palantine. It could be argued that Travis was destined to miss, and that there is no contradiction here. This, however, would be a moot point, because, as the film's ending is ambiguous about Travis's fate, we never know how he ends up, and we cannot infer whether or not he ever actually kills Palantine after the events of the film; as Derrida says in *Of Grammatology*, "there is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida 158). We see Travis readying his guns, shining his boots, sharpening his knife, and proclaiming his supposed "fate," all before going to a political rally to shoot Palantine. Because all of this happens in a sequence, we can assume that, when Travis says that there is "no choice" for him, he is referring to shooting the senator. Because Travis does not fulfill what he considers to be his "destiny," the film's determinist message is undermined once again.

Travis further undermines the determinist agenda by shooting up the brothel to save Iris. As stated above, we are apparently supposed to understand that Travis sees shooting Palantine as his destiny. There is no soliloquy, however, between the scene of the failed assassination attempt and the brothel shootout. Travis appears to decide on his own to shoot Matthew and rescue Iris. Just as we cannot infer Travis's fate, we cannot infer his reasoning for attacking the brothel; since his reasons are never given within the confines in the film, we can never know his intentions because there is nothing outside the text. Because of this, the leanings of the film are dismantled; the main character, who the film attempts to show as shrugging off libertarianism in favor of determinism, makes a choice of his own that brings us to the climax of the film.

It is because of these instances, then, that the ideology that rests on the binary opposition of determinism/libertarianism seems limited. It could perhaps be seen that the two members of the opposition do not directly oppose each other. Instead, it is possible that they overlap within the confines of the text. Travis begins to believe that he has no choice in

life, but we see that he very obviously makes a choice in regards to shooting Palantine. However, Travis's choice to become interested in firearms and obsess over the senator do stem from a prior event in his life: being dumped by Betsy. According to William James, *soft* determinism, as opposed to hard determinism, allows that people can make their own choices, but are products of prior choices they have made (James 2). Travis's transformation into a determinist, as well as his apparent change back to a libertarian, seems to be inspired by his failed relationship with Betsy. Because of this, then, while the film's message of "determinism governs everyone's life" deconstructs and does not hold water, the film does seem to be saying that libertarianism and determinism can both reconcile as soft determinism.

It is the duty of deconstruction to show not only how the ideologies of a text deconstruct, but also how the way in which these ideologies operate in our own view of the world (Tyson, 253). *Taxi Driver* allows us to apply this new meaning to our own lives through its use of camera angles. The camera angle throughout most of the film is extremely claustrophobic, and never leaves Travis's side. We, as viewers, are often forced into the confines of his taxi cab, and are forced to participate in all of his actions. This, as seen in films such as *The Wrong Man*, *Clerks*, and *Bonnie and Clyde*, gives the viewer a sense of being present in the action, and adds to the reality effect of the film. In this way, we feel as if we are also present for Travis's metaphysical journey, and, in turn, we can learn and discover our own views in regards to the binary opposition of determinism/libertarianism.

While *Taxi Driver* attempts to portray Travis Bickle as an anti-hero who has no choice in his actions, we have seen how the binary opposition governing the film's ideology deconstructs. While characters such as Wizard and even Travis himself claim otherwise, they all misspeak, and, because of this, they allow the binary to give in on itself, showing how determinism and libertarianism are not actually opposed, but can instead co-exist peacefully. Furthermore, the viewer can personally apply this new meaning to understand how the ideology of the film is reflected in his own life. However, it is important to note that this analysis of the film is only one of infinitely many; this interpretation only represents a "moment" in the text's dissemination of meanings, and will be "infinitely repeated" so long as people continue to watch *Taxi Driver* (Derrida *lx*). After all, meaning, in the words of Travis Bickle, "goes on and on. It doesn't end."

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